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Early American Comedy

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EARLY AMERICAN COMEDY[1]

By Elbridge Colby

THE most characteristic thing about the earliest American plays, published on this side of the Atlantic prior to the Revolution, was that they were revolutionary. It was the same in all other departments of literature, and the conditions naturally applied to the comic side of the drama. Whatever the reason may be, it seems a well established fact in the history of all literature that colonies are unable to develop a vigorous and characteristic writing tradition. The political bond between India and England makes the Eastern Empire look to London for guidance in art and letters as well as in diplomacy, political economy, and commerce. New currents of thought produce new literatures, but new currents of thought do not thrive without independence. Before the Revolution and for some time afterwards, American publication was almost entirely restricted to reprints of English editions.

The first American plays were revolutionary, for they had found a new stimulating idea, a thesis of military enthusiasm and opposition. Thus we have Brackenridge writing "The Battle of Bunker Hill" (1776) and the "Death of General Montgomery" (1777). Mrs. Mercy Warren depicts the Bostonian theme of revolution in "The Group" (1775), "The Blockheads" (1776), and "The Motley Assembly" (1779). She was the daughter of James Otis and wife of General James Warren, and it is not surprising therefore to find that "The Blockheads" is a flippant farce, replying to General Burgoyne's production, "The Blockade." The connection between England and the colonies was, for the moment, completely broken. Their principles were in opposition and so the colonial literature was free. "Common Sense," "The Crisis," the verse of Philip Freneau, and that of Trumbull could not have been written earlier; not so much that the facts did not demand them, but because the former ideas could not have given birth to such prodigies. The play, "The Military Glory of Great Britain," given one September at Princeton (1762), was succeeded by Peacock's drama "The Fall of British Tyranny."

But once the fighting was past and independence was gained, there was a reaction. Commercial houses in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charlestown resumed their profitable relations with British merchants, and likewise theatrical managers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charlestown looked once more to London for dramatic traditions

[1] The reader is referred to List of American Dramas in The New York Public Library. (Bulletin, Oct., 1915, vol. 19, p. 739–786. Also issued as a separate.)

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and innovations. Literature is very much a matter of continuity and conventions; and stage literature cannot be built up in a new and sparsely populated country. The scattered play-houses of the young United States were compelled, therefore, to look to London for plays and for inspiration. Nor is it fantastic thus to speak of the tendency of the American drama for, prior to 1850, there was nothing which could properly be called an individual note in our stage productions. We were dependent upon England.

Aside from the mere fact that these managers were really dependent upon England for the canon of theatrical literature from which they must draw in order to get up an attractive repertoire, they were dependent in another way, more direct and more determining. The crime of international literary piracy was world-wide, lack of decent copyright relations put the American publishers in a position where they often refused to pay a moderate price even for the American book which they knew to be good, because they could secure more cheaply a popular English book. The amount it cost them was almost nothing: the payment of charges on a postal packet and a small fee to an agent in St. Paul's churchyard who made a business of such traffic. There was a short and exciting race to see which New York or Philadelphia firm could issue a volume with his imprint first; then the book-market in the States saw another contemporary British volume taking the popular fancy and discouraging local production. Wrote Washington Irving to a novelist across the water in 1829: "If you can furnish me with a manuscript copy of the earlier part of the work, and supply the subsequent in sheets as struck off, so as to give some bookseller in America the decided start of his competitors, I think it highly probable I can get a little something for it to pay you for your trouble." Under such conditions as these, William Gilmore Simms was told by his publishers: "We do not see much hope in the future for the American writer of light literature — as a matter of profit it might be abandoned." The wonder of the matter is that a Simms, an Irving, a Poe, a Cooper, and a Neal, managed to succeed at all. They were in competition with acknowledged favorite and popular masters whose books were mailed across the ocean and reproduced with incredible speed. This is the reason that a distinctive American comedy was slow and hesitating about showing its head. It had to face competition with tried successes from London and had to cater to an audience fed on that type of drama. Its character was moulded to a great extent by the character of the comedies then being produced in New York. And these comedies were English comedies.

Ten plays of George Colman, Charles Dibdin, Thomas Holcroft, Mrs. Inchbald, John O'Keefe, R. B. Sheridan, the English adaptations from

Kotzebue, and other pieces which went well in London, came laughing across the Atlantic. Then there was the rage of dramatization. Fanny Birney's "Evelina" appeared on Boston boards as "The Poor Lodger" (1811); "The Shepherdess of the Alps" waited thirty-five years and then came in 1815; Scott's embattled "Marmion" fought in America (1812); Mrs. Radcliffe's "Romance of the Forest" built a colonial reputation as "Fountainville Abbey" (1795).

Perhaps, though, the most important single influence in bringing this British atmosphere was even more direct. The plays came not so much in the portmanteaus of publishers as on the lips of players. Charles Mathews, George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, Thomas Cooper, and many others came to push their fortunes or to receive applauding homage on a new stage in a new world. Thus it happened that the historic successes of Covent Garden and the Drury Lane, as well as the recent innovations there, crowded the playhouses of the States. There were theatres in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Fredericksburg, and Charlestown, but they might have been called Theatres-Royal of Liverpool, Drury-Lane, Covent-Garden, or the Hay-Market, instead of Chestnut Street, Holliday Street, John Street, the Lafayette, or the Park Theatres, for all the difference their localities made.

A bibliographical study of any of the English playwrights of this period, of George Colman, Charles Dibdin, Thomas Holcroft, Mrs. Inchbald, John O'Keefe, Prince Hoare, R. B. Sheridan, will show editions of their plays which bear on their quaint title-pages the note: "Printed: London. Re-printed: New York." Of all the long series of dramas put through the press and "published by David Longworth, at the Dramatic Repository, Shakespeare-Gallery, New York," the very great majority are English plays put forth in pirated editions. Thus did the American drama exist, amid a perfect pandemonium of English plays which made their London applause so great that it was re-echoed before the New York foot-lights. Dunlap tells how "The Abbé de l'Epee" was brought over in 1801 and we are not surprised; but we are surprised when we find even so obscure a piece as "The Deserted Daughter" put on with success in New York. Even though Britons liked it not, the very London hall-mark was guarantee for American production. There was one play ordered in New York which illustrates this influence and its force, says Weyelin, "From the prejudice then existing against American plays, it was announced as the production of an English author, received with unbounded applause in London."

Thus it is natural that the American comedies of the period between the Revolution and the Civil War fall into very nearly the same categories as

the British comedies of the corresponding years. One kind of wit which gained acceptance in London was a ridiculous representation of provincials, of Irishmen and Scots, simple characters with such wit and antics and plain honesty as Irishmen and Scots seldom had. So in America we have imitations of these in "Rural Felicity" (1801) by John Winchell, "Kathleen O'Neil; or, A Picture of Feudal Times" (1829?) by George Pepper; and two sprightly Hibernian sketches from the pen of James Pilgrim, just before the guns of Moultrie turned belligerent thoughts to other fields of endeavor.

Another type which took the London audiences, especially after the "School for Scandal" had set the pace, was what might be called the drama of sensibility, the old sentimental comedy intermixed with a certain degree of stilted humor. So in America there was "The Female Patriot" (1795) by Mrs. Rawson, the "School for Prodigals" (1809) by Joseph Hutton, the "Fox Chase" (1808), and "The Trust" (1808) by Charles Breck, "Tears and Smiles" (1808) and "How to Try a Lover" (1811) by John N. Barker, and "The Sprightly Widow" (1803), "He Stoops to Conquer" (1804) and "The Merry Dames" (1804) by John Winshall. The regular drama in England showed the contagious influence of the farce, these American comedies did likewise. They are built about ingenious situations, and the characters are either on the one hand completely subordinated to the situations or on the other hand exaggerated in caricatures.

Two other influences were being felt in England; a comic opera tendency illustrated very well in "The Shepherdess of the Alps" (1780), already cited, and in "The Noble Peasant" (1786); and a tendency toward a combination of declamations and scenic solemnity, for this was the age of Kemble and Kean. So, in America, we find three plays which fit very well, though somewhat confusedly into that part of English drama that was under these two influences. Mrs. Rawson's "Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom" (1794) with songs and spectacles, John Hodgkinson's "Robin Hood; or, Sherwood Forest" (1808), and Joseph Hutton's "The Orphan of Prague" (1810), have scarce a line in them that is distinctly American, and they might as well have been put on in London.

What is thus seen, in a dramatic way, of this transoceanic similarity in the matter of managerial selections for stage production is additionally demonstrated by a brief scrutiny of the activities of two of the foremost American playwrights of the period. William Dunlap and John Howard Payne had British connections in an actual, physical, as well as in a literary sense. One of the most distinct characteristics in the life of Dunlap must be reckoned his propensity for journeying to London, attending the theatres there, adapting

English plays, keeping in close touch with Holcroft, Colman, and other English writers, bringing over promising actors like Cooper and renowned ones like Kean, changing English versions of continental dramatists like "Pizarro" (1800), "The Voice of Nature" (1803), and "Fraternal Discord" (1800). Two of Payne's pieces were produced almost simultaneously in London and in New York, "Accusation" (1816) and "Adeline" (1822); and his first attempt, written at the age of fourteen, "Julia; or, The Wanderer" (1806), was based upon Mrs. Inchbald's and Benjamin Thompson's translation of Kotzebue's "Lover's Vows." The interrelation was obvious and evident between London and New York, through Dunlap.

In a larger sense we find these two men following the moods and fancies of the British stage, so that the American stage likewise had its Kotzebue rage in Dunlap's "Pizarro" (1800), his "Fraternal Discord" (1800), and in Payne's "Julia; or, The Wanderer" (1806); had its melodrama in Dunlap's "The Voice of Nature" (1803) from the French, and in Payne's "The Two Galley Slaves" (1823), "Adeline, the Victim of Seduction" (1822), "Ali Pacha; or, The Signet Ring" (1823), and "Accusation" (1816) from "La Famille d'Anglade"; had its comic opera on the English model in Dunlap's "The Glory of Columbia" (1803), and in Payne's "Clari; or, The Maid of Milan" [2] (1823); had its own patriotic spectacles after the fashion of those London productions which celebrated the glorious victories of Nelson, in Dunlap's "Yankee Chronology" (1811), and in S. B. H. Judah's "A Tale of Lexington" (1823); had its own local musical farce in the anonymous "Out of Place" (1808); had its replica of the farces of Foote and Bickerstaffe, Colman, and Mrs. Inchbald, in a type which may be represented by "A Trip to Niagara" (1829); had its touch of Orientalism, which Byron and Moore popularized in both Europe and America, and balanced the spectacular "Timour the Tartar" of Drury-Lane with "Ali Pacha; or, The Signet Ring (1823) by Payne; had its comedy of sensibility in Dunlap's "The Father" (1789), "Darby's Return" (1791), and "The Italian Father" (1799). The correspondence is complete and almost exact. America not only imported the London successes, but imitated them with its right hand when its left hand was trying to be original.

Though we may show similarities in the comedy of sensibility and in the Kotzebue stampede of moral dramas of domesticity, perhaps the best example of this intimate connection is to be found when we examine the great success of that type known as the melodrama. Within one year of the appearance of "A Tale of Mystery" from Pixerécourt on the Covent-Garden boards, no less than four editions of the London version stolen from France were in turn stolen from England and on sale in the bookshops of New York and

[2] In which "Home, Sweet Home" became popular and famous.

Boston. The revolutionary simplification, the individual morality, the poetic justice of this *genre* were not only accepted but also eagerly followed in America. For some years the importations from England held the stage, and then the playwrights of the United States tried their hand at the same thing, beginning with John B. Turnbull and his "Rudolph; or, The Robbers of Calabria" (1807) "with marches, combats, and choruses." Turnbull's next play fits in as a good example of the form: "The Wood Demon; or, The Clock has Struck! A grand, romantic, cabalistic, melodrama, in three Acts: unsurpassed with Processions, Pageants, and Pantomime" (1808).

It may be well to examine a bit into this novel species of entertainment. A comedy dealing with ordinary people is enriched with some spectacle in the way of dances and decorations. There are some songs; there are scenes of high passion; but most important of all is the use of music, not to supplement, but to supersede, the words. In many moments of intense interest the characters do not speak at all; they merely act, as the music changes from cheerful and sweet to loud and raucous. Notes are interpolated throughout the printed play to indicate where characters and orchestra should shriek together, where the music expresses confusion, and pain of thought, and dejection, and joy. This mixture of dialogue and dumb show formed the *mélodrame* where "the concord of sweet sounds" never accompanied the words, but replaced them from time to time as a better means of interpreting emotion. It was not sentiment. It was not Sheridanism. It was romantic, a conscience yielding to the past and struggling with the future. It embodies the sweet simplicity of Wordsworth and the extravagant coloring of Byron. Such was the *mélodrame* which, after certain changes, has become our modern melodrama. The stage was believed to be a very efficient school of morality. "The Evil Eye" (1831) by James B. Phillipps, no less than "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model"; "The Mountain Torrent" (1820) by S. B. H. Judah, no less than "The Fatal Wedding," were melodramas, though they were also by the chance of circumstance, included in the type of *mélodrame*. The hero is poor but honest; the heroine of the whitest white; the villain of the blackest shade; and the cause of the villain is always in the ascendant until the last act, when he goes straight to hell — and the gallery gods rejoice at his fall.

This is the main outline of the class of play applauded at Drury-Lane which also held the stage in New York, but there was in it a very definite tendency. It was the age of romanticism, of interest in scenes and people remote from humdrum circumstances and situations. The novels of Scott were frequently dramatized in London into melodramatic *mélodrames;* so also "The Red Rover" (1828), "The Last of the Mohicans" (1849), and "Paul

Jones; or, The Pilot of German Ocean"[3] (1828) in New York. The American local appeal of these Cooper tales was of course some reason for their success. But the romantic drama placed in picturesque and remote scenes was just as well received. It was after the British manner that the anonymous author of "The Sultana; or, A trip to Turkey" (1822) follows Byron's "Don Juan" and quotes from Thomas Moore's "The Lighthouse"; that William Barrymore used improved scenic devices and settings in "The Snow Storm; or, Lowina of Tobolskow" (1818); that J. Stokes followed "Mark" Lewis's device of a bleeding nun in "The Forest of Rosenwald; or, The Travellers Benighted" (1820); that S. B. H. Judah combined music with Spanish scenery in "The Rose of Arragon" (1822); that W. G. Hyer emphasized romance pure but not simple in "Rosa" (1822); that M. M. Noah combined some of the new decorative romanticism with something of the old tale of terror elements as they were even then seeing combined in England, when he produced "The Wandering Boys; or, The Castle of Olival (1812); and "The Fortress of Sorrento" (1808). On both sides of the water the castles of Italy, the Gothic forests of Germany, the lattices of sunny Spain, the gorgeous costumes of the Levant, and the corsairs of the beautiful blue Mediterranean had an appeal that amounted almost to a clear call to follow fantastic legendary, and distant half-lights.

If the predominating characteristic of these plays between 1800 and 1850 was that they were not characteristically American at all, the reason is perhaps to be found in the fact that their writers were usually professional men of letters like Longfellow, whose "Spanish Student" (1843) and Irving whose "Bracebridge Hall" (1822) showed a closer literary union with the bookish traditions of Europe than with their fellow townsmen in the small cities of the States. Dunlap and Payne, already mentioned, are good examples, Samuel H. Chapman, author of "Red Rover" (1828), was an actor. M. M. Noah was editor, critic, and author as well as a playwright, yet there began to creep into their work some connection with American scenes and traditions. "Red Rover" was never far from the three-mile limit. Samuel Woodworth's "Lafayette; or, The Castle of Olmuntz" (1824), John N. Barker's "The Indian Princes" (1808), founded on Smith's "Virginia," Simms' "Benedict Arnold" (1863), G. W. Parke Curtis's "Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia" (1830), nor for that matter Robert Dale Owen's unacted "Pocahontas" (1837) could scarcely be said to deal with matters far remote from American thought.

These years just at the turn of the half century begin to mark a great change in all American literature. It is commencing to be American. Cooper

[3] This last by W. H. Wallack. It is interesting to note that another play on the same subject was taken by W. Berger in 1839 not from Cooper, but from Dumas.

had written of Indians and of Revolutionists in the spirit of Scott. Hawthorne in "The Scarlet Letter" (1850) and in the "Mosses from the Old Manse" (1846), Mrs. Stowe in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852), R. T. S. Lowell in "The New Priest of Conception Bay" (1858), Theodore Winthrop in "John Brent" (1861) and "Cecil Dreeme" (1861), — these developed what has come to be known as the "novel of locality" and paved the way for Mark Twain and Bret Harte and O. Henry, and we cannot count how many more. The United States was in a fair way to develop a literature of its own.

Following Irving's pioneer efforts came John Kerr with "Rip Van Winkle; or, The Demons of the Catskill Mountains" (1830); came Simms with the unacted and unactable "Norman Maurice; or, The Man of the People" (1851); came George Jones with "Tecumseh and the Prophet of the West" (1844); came A. C. O. M. Ritchie with "Fashion; or, Life in New York" (1850); came James Pilgrim with "The Female Highwayman" (1852) and "The Buccaneer of the Gulf" (1852); came H. S. Conway with "Dred, a Tale of Dismal Swamp" (1856); came Thomas Dunn English with "The Mormons; or, Life at Salt Lake City" (1858); came Halleck's "Mr. Mead" with "Wall Street; or, Ten Minutes Before Three" (1840) a farce preferable to Athenian dramas, as Halleck said; came finally the most definite dramatic localization of all — American urban and rural life — at the hands of J. B. Howe in "The Woman of the World" (1858). We have at the last a definitely American dramatist in Joseph Stevens Jones who dramatized "Captain Kyd" (1858?), "Moll Pitcher; or, The Fortune Teller of Lynn" (1855), "Solon Shingle; or, The People's Lawyer" (1850), and "The Usurper; or, Americans in Tripoli" (1842).

Just as the long period of commercial and national unification was about to be broken abruptly by the guns of the Civil War, two gentlemen who were not distinctly American in the entirety of their lives contributed some of the most distinctly American dramas that are to be found in all our period. John Brougham, while in the States, did a large variety of things. He put "David Copperfield" and "Dombey and Son" on the stage. He produced three rather London-like comedies, "The Game of Life," "The Game of Love," and "Flies in the Web." He constructed two traditional melodramas, "The Gunmaker of Moscow" (1856) and "The Red Mask; or, The Wolf of Lithuania" (1856). But, in spite of these tendencies, we cannot forget that he dramatized "Dred; or, The Dismal Swamp" (1856), nor — and this is much more important — that he wrote a thoroughly typical local comedy "The Lottery of Life, a Story of New York" (1860). And Dion Boucicault is another similar example. Mr. Chesterton has remarked that the most important thing

about Rossetti has been said when we have written his name, — an Italian in England. But the same cannot with justice be said of Boucicault. "The Phantom" (1856), "The Poor of New York" (1857), and "The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana" (1861), are as thoroughly American as the most vigorous local feeling could require.

In conclusion, therefore, we have seen how the American comedy commenced life tied to the apron strings of a tiresome type of English drama, how during the Revolution there was violent and somewhat petulant attack upon the dominating nursemaid, and how close relations were once more established, not to be broken until a slow adolescence gave place to an awakening maturity. American comedy, for want of mature experience and sensible intuition, followed English comedy into the Kotzebue fracas, obediently adopted the enormities of the *mélodrame* and the romantic melodrama, and grew to advanced age with little strength or individuality. Copyright relations and personal affection for English dramatists, as well as the usual deterrent circumstances, combined to effect a state of affairs where one scarcely now reads American comedies of this period. To do it requires courage, patience, and a sense of humor. In many cases it might be well to follow Dr. Johnson's advice and refrain from reading before writing a review of these comedies, in order to avoid the unpleasant effects of prejudice resulting from personal dislike.

Yet, eventually, there did emerge a localized American comedy. Under the influence of historical pride, abolitionist agitation, of westward progress, of growing commercial strength, and of the success of the new "novel of locality," there finally emerged, in the decade preceding the Civil War, a distinct tendency towards a comedy with scenes, characters, and manners distinctly American, as opposed to the scenes, characters, and manners distinctly British in origin which had formerly been paraded before the footlights of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

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